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ABSTRACT

In-depth interviews were conducted with 13 special education teachers who work with aggressive students to better understand their work experiences and career decisions. Analysis of textual information supported two interrelated themes: (1) the unpredictability of aggression; and (2) the role of student teacher relationships as important to understanding job stress, job success, and job satisfaction for these teachers. Detailed results of the analysis are reported for the following areas: salient contextual and student features to which teachers attend while working with student aggression and how teacher perceptions of student aggression relate to stress and job satisfaction. Discussion focuses on the teachers' perceived need to make sense of aggression, the importance of structuring the teacher's job to maximize the quality of the student/teacher relationships, and the need to conduct research on relationship issues in classrooms for students with behavior disorders. (Contains 34 references.) (DB)

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Job Stress in Perspective: Behavioral Disabilities Teachers and Student Aggression

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Abstract

This study investigates the work experience of 13 special education teachers who work with aggressive students. In-depth interviews were the source of information for the study. Findings of the study are used to better understand features of their work that influence careers decisions of teachers working with aggressive students. Analysis of textual information supported two interrelated themes, 1) the unpredictability of aggression and 2) the role of student/teacher relationships as important to understanding job stress, job success, and job satisfaction for participants in the study. Suggestions for increasing the job satisfaction of BD teachers, implications for teacher preparation, and future research directions are discussed.

JOB STRESS IN PERSPECTIVE: BEHAVIOR DISABILITIES TEACHERS AND STUDENT AGGRESSION

Introduction

Teachers who work with behaviorally challenging students have among the shortest work tenures in education (Billingsley, Pyecha, Smith-Davis Murray & Hendricks, 1995; Brownell & Smith 1993; Center & Calloway, 1999; Lawrenson & McKinnon, 1982; Pullis, 1992; Smith-Davis & Billingsley, 1993). Historically, BD (Behavioral Disabilities) teachers have been in short supply and this shortage is becoming critical (Billingsley, et al, 1995; Brownell & Smith 1993; Pullis, 1992; Smith-Davis & Billingsley, 1993). Pullis (1992) identified the shortage of BD teachers as the greatest challenge faced by the BD field. This study explores the work of veteran teachers whose primary work is with behaviorally challenging students. It is hoped that in better understanding those who stay in the field, we can learn what might be important to prevent others from leaving.

An Overview of the Career Decisions of BD Teachers

Research exploring career decisions has more frequently looked at special education teachers as a whole, rather than looking at the subset of BD teachers. It is, however, useful to understand career decisions for special education teachers for several reasons. First: Studies exploring career decisions of special education teachers

(e.g. Billingsley, 1993; Billingsley & Cross, 1991;; Billingsley et al, 1995; Brownell & Smith, 1992; Brownell & Smith 1993; Cooley & Yavonoff, 1996) have found similarities with those studies looking specifically at BD teachers'

career decisions (Lawrenson & McKinnon, 1981; Pullis, 1992). Second: Many special education teachers are cross-categorical, and work with BD students, although not identifying themselves as BD teachers. By combining both sources of information, we come to a better understanding of career decisions-making for teachers of students with challenging behaviors.

Special education teacher tenure has been explored through longitudinal studies of teacher career paths (Singer, 1992), special education teacher decisions to stay or leave employment (Brownell & Smith, 1992; Brownell & Smith 1993), and the source of job stress (McMannis & Kauffman, 1991; Pullis, 1992). Excessive paperwork; lack of support from administrators, peers and parents; and stressful role demands are primary reasons for work dissatisfaction (Billingsley, 1993; Billingsley & Cross, 1991; Billingsley et al., 1995; Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996.) Role demands include such factors as time constraints due to meetings and duties outside the classroom (Billingsley et al., 1995; Brownell, Smith, & McNellis, 1994), caseload size (Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1994), working with more challenging students (Brownell & Smith, 1992; Brownell et al., 1994), and student aggression (Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996; Dedrick & Raschke, 1990).

Among the most comprehensive models of career decisions of special education teachers is one proposed by Brownell and Smith (1993). The Brownell and Smith model is helpful when considering the complex situations in which decisions to stay or leave the field are made by special education teachers (BD teachers are subsumed within this larger group). In the Brownell and Smith model, demographic characteristics (higher NTE test scores, youth, being a female, and higher social class) place special education teachers at greater risk for leave

their jobs. At the same time, lengthier formal training and preparation may increase the likelihood of staying. Factors affecting career decisions are viewed by Brownell and Smith as an interactive and layered system, with demands and supports in the classroom, school, district, and community all influencing job satisfaction and eventual decisions to leave or stay on the job. This model reflects the complexity of the work life of special education teachers, with changing demands and supports. Over time, various demands and supports take on greater or lesser importance in the teacher's evaluation of his or her own job satisfaction. When demands outweigh supports, decisions to leave or to change work positions are more likely.

Studies specifically aimed at the career decisions of BD teachers lend support to the Brownell & Smith model. Lawrenson and McKinnon (1981) surveyed BD teachers and found that level of job satisfaction was the result of the interplay of positive and negative work factors. The former included quality of student and peer relationships and measures of student success. Lack of support, paperwork, and limited recognition for work were reported as factors that diminished work quality. In the Pullis (1992) exploration of work stress of BD teachers, similar sources of work stress were found, though the study did not explore ameliorative factors that may serve to mitigate negative work stressors. In a recent study, Center and Calloway (1999) found a positive relationship between work stress for BD teachers and the likelihood of leaving the profession, thereby supporting the importance of looking at the relationship among stress factors and possible mitigating features of the work environment for BD teachers. An interesting finding of the Center and Calloway study concerned the role of student

aggression and stress for BD teachers.

BD Teachers and Student Aggression

Logic would have it that exposure to aggression in the workplace would be stressful, and aggression is mentioned as a source of job stress for special education teachers in some studies (Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996). (Cooley and Yavonoff use the phrase "challenging student behaviors", [p. 338], when citing reasons teachers leave the field.) It is possible, however, that while student aggression contributes to job stress, it may not be a primary reason for leaving the field for teachers. For example, the Center and Calloway (1999) study investigated the relationship between job stressors, personality type, and retention/attrition decisions for BD teachers. The study found that BD teachers experience more injuries by students than was previously reported, (19% of the teachers surveyed reported being injured by students within the last year), but also found that injury by student was not reported as significant a source of stress as other variables for the BD teachers. In the interpretation of results, Center and Calloway appeared puzzled by this finding stating, "Somewhat surprising was the failure to find a significant relationship between injury by students and reported stressors," (p.47).

While there are mixed results about the role student aggression plays in BD teacher stress and possible attrition, it does not follow that we should be unconcerned about the issue. It is possible, that teachers who find student aggression stressful are either hesitant to enter the field or are quick to leave the profession, so that in studies like the Center and Calloway study, a truncated group of teachers is investigated. It may be that the field could attract more teachers to the profession, or retain more of those already in the field, if there was a better

understanding of the role of student aggression in job stress for BD teacher. Through understanding perceptions of working with student aggression, we may know better how to prepare educators as they enter the field and provide those already teaching with supports that would serve to diminish eventual attrition rates. Finally, several studies suggest that teacher stress related to student aggression may be mitigated by positive workplace factors (Brownell & Smith, 1993; Lawrenson & McKinnon, 1981). Effects of student aggression on BD teachers should therefore include a look at those mitigating factors.

In order to understand the complexity of factors related to the stressful effects of student aggression, it is necessary to take a holistic view of the question. Such a view is the intent of this study. Once we understand what is important to BD teachers about experiences of student aggression, we can more directly provide tools, environmental modifications, and training valued by BD teachers. The following questions are addressed in this study:

1) What are the salient contextual and student features BD teachers attend to while working with student aggression?
2) How do teacher perceptions of student aggression relate to stress and job satisfaction?
3) What implications arise from an understanding of BD teacher experiences of student aggression?

Methodology and Method

The Brownell and Smith model is helpful in understanding the interplay of positive and negative factors in teacher career decisions, but it minimizes an important feature of work stress: the importance of teacher perception of their

work experience. It is well known in research on human stress (Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998; Perlin, 1989) that it is the perception of stressors, and not the stressor itself, that determines actual experiences of stress. What may be experienced as stressful and an inducement to leave the field by one BD teacher or at one point in time may not have the same effect on another BD teacher or at a different point in time. For example, the stress level a teacher experiences following an incident of student aggression is affected by many factors. To name a few: the student's prior behavioral history, whether or not the teacher appraises the behavior as being potentially dangerous to other students, the skills the teacher has to handle aggression, and the availability of staff support to assist in handling student aggression. The contextualized perception of aggression, as well as the teacher's later interpretation of the aggression, is important in understanding the stress value an aggressive incident has for a teacher. In regard to the latter point, a teacher who views the student aggression as sensible (the student came to school agitated after witnessing parental conflict at home), might view the student aggression as less stressful than a teacher who can make no sense of the aggression.

Methodology

The present study is conducted from the perspective the BD teachers. Qualitative methods were used to discover the ways BD teachers interpret their experiences with student aggression. Inductive methods are particularly well suited to investigate the perceptions of BD teachers, without imposing the researcher's preexisting ideas on the direction of participant responses. An ideographic analysis offers insights into the role student aggression plays in the work experience of BD

teachers within the contexts in which those experiences occur.

While the methodology of this study is qualitative in nature, it is most consistent with in-depth phenomenological methods (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Clandinin, 1985; Coleman, 1994; McPhail, 1995; Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1989; Van Manen, 1990). The phenomenological method utilizes in-depth interviews as a vehicle for detailed, perspectival descriptions of a phenomenon (in this case, student aggression). Three assumptions of phenomenological approaches are: 1) people interpret and understand events in a personal way; 2) in describing the event in question, people attend to and report what they perceive to be important features of the event, and 3) if we know a person's perceptions regarding what is important about an event, we better understand the factors that are more likely to influence the person's behavior in similar situations. Because the intent of inquiry is to get a detailed, unbiased account of the participant's experience, interviews are lengthy, focused on descriptions of an event, begin with asking about a specific event, and use prompts and further questions to get at greater detail and depth in descriptions of the event in question.

Methods

Participants. Thirteen participants were selected from elementary and secondary public school settings, including those working in separate facilities serving only students with significant behavior problems. There were two important requirements for inclusion in this study. One was that the participant had worked at least six years in special education. Six years in the field was chosen for several reasons: About half of the new special education teachers hired

leave within the first few years in the profession, but after these first "hazardous" (Singer, 1992, p.268) years in the profession, the number of those leaving drops dramatically. More specifically, teachers are less likely to leave the field after the six-year mark and are more likely to make the profession their life work with each year they remain in the field (Brownell & Smith, 1993; Singer, 1993; Willet & Singer, 1991). In choosing a cutoff of six years, participants picked represented those who had passed the first "hazardous" years in the profession and were more likely to remain in the field. Veteran teachers also have considerable experience upon which to draw during the interview. Finally, it was assumed that those teachers who did not leave the field in their early years of work, would reflect perceptions of their experience that might provide information useful to those interested in teacher vitality and retention.

A second requirement for inclusion in the study was that the participant had spent the majority of their work experience with "behaviorally challenging" students. It was decided not to limit the study to teachers specifically labeled "BD Teacher," since many teachers working with BD students work under different titles and also because teacher work titles change over time. For purposes of this study, although the title 'BD Teacher' may be used, it is meant to signal this broader definition of the term—those who work primarily with aggressive students. It is the experience of working with student aggression, and not the title of the teacher that is the focus of the study. (Most teachers in the study called themselves BD teachers, or had spent much of their career with that or a similar job title.)

A list of potential participants was developed through oral announcements

at professional meetings, through networking with professional contacts of the researcher, and through snowballing techniques in which one participant suggests another who might want to participate in the study. Potential participants not meeting the selection criteria were not interviewed. The interviews of two initial participants constituted the pilot stage of the study and the following 13 interviews were the source of the findings of this study. Demographic data in Table 1 describes the career paths, training, and experience of participants.

Demographic data collected prior to the interviews showed that most participants had work experience in a variety of settings, including special education classrooms, hospitals, institutions, jails, and special schools not directly related to the public schools. In addition, many participants had taught in both secondary and elementary settings. As a group, participants seemed to move from job to job with some frequency, although most of their work continued to be associated with students with severe behavior problems.

<Table 1 Here>

Interview Procedures. In addition to the collection of demographic data, individual in-depth interviews were conducted. In the interview, each participant was asked for detailed descriptions of experiences they had with student aggression. No attempt to was made to define 'aggression' for the participants during the interview. There are several reasons for this practice: 1 To define aggression for the participant would limit the experiences described to an outsider's idea of aggression, while it is the teacher's perceptions that influence the meaning an event has for them, and 2) The implication of an aggressive act varies greatly with the context in which it occurs, so that the verbal aggression of a

particular student in a particular setting may hold more real danger than a physical aggression in another context. Because aggression is believed to be contextualized, and its meaning personal to each participant within that context, to define the term would be to limit the understanding of aggression for each participant. Participants were allowed to choose an event that they defined as aggressive and were encouraged to describe that incident.

Following the initial question, additional prompts and questions were used, both to ensure understanding of participants' responses and to get descriptions with the greatest detail possible. These methods are similar to those used in clinical settings, where the goal is to understand the perspective of the client. Such interview techniques have been helpful in understanding an event from the perspective of the person who experiences that event, while minimizing the possible bias introduced by an interviewer with more structured pre-designed questions (Kvale, 1996). Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours, although most lasted about one hour.

Interviews were transcribed and participants were sent copies of their interview transcripts to allow them to make changes should they wish. They also were given the results of subsequent analysis and again invited to respond to the interpretation of the interview data. In all, participants were contacted at three different points during the study, and at each time, were invited to make comments, ask questions, or suggest possible changes. All responses received in this way were used to "check" the validity of interpretations made by the researcher and to add additional information to the textual data base.

Analysis procedures. Transcribed texts and further communications with

participants were analyzed by the individual researcher and also by a collaborative interdisciplinary research group trained and experienced in phenomenological inquiry. This two-tiered interpretive process identified the themes common across interviews and the relationship among those themes. Data analysis began with reading each transcript in its entirety, in order for researchers to get the "larger picture". Next, the text was read paragraph by paragraph, with researchers stopping to discuss the meaning of each paragraph and the themes suggested by each piece of text. Themes were simplified terms or ideas repeated in the texts. For example, "*I never knew what to expect,*" and "*There was no telling what he would do next,*" were both examples of an "unpredictability" theme. Only those themes supported repeatedly in the text were identified as primary themes. The primary themes that were common across studies were organized into a theoretical schema that accounted for the patterns and relationships described in the text. To illustrate this point, the two short statements presented above would be compared to the surrounding text to see in what context(s) they occurred so that the researchers could understand possible links between features of the classroom (events, people, physical environment and so on) and the commonly reported theme 'unpredictability'. The process of linking common themes to contextual patterns was repeated until only the most frequently reported themes and their consistent contextual features across participants were identified.

Qualitative analysis of this type results in a comprehensive and detailed picture of the phenomenon under investigation. The scope of such detailed information is often more than can be addressed in a single study. Therefore, when reporting results, it is common to choose one aspect of the analysis for

exploration. For purposes of this study, themes describing teacher perceptions of student aggression, including both positive and negative features of the experience, are most pertinent to the questions earlier posed.

Findings

Analysis of the data yielded two global elements that were central to classroom perception of aggression: the unpredictable aspect of aggression and the importance of relationships within that unpredictable setting. While other themes were identified, unpredictability and relationship were the most dominant and inclusive. Findings are presented here in answer to the first two questions posed at the beginning of the study. The third question will be addressed in the final section of the paper. (Please note: because the theoretical perspective of this paper is derived from the interview text of the participants, data in the form of interview text is included to support and illustrate the points being made. The quotations are intended to give a flavor for the text data and represent only a small portion of the actual data that was analyzed in the course of the study.) Demographic information of each participant quoted is found in Table 1.

What are the Salient Contextual and Student Features to Which Teachers Attend While Working with Student Aggressions?

In classrooms where student characteristics include challenging behaviors, an important feature of the classroom context has to do with unpredictability. Within this unpredictable environment, student/teacher relationships take on special importance. Each of these two themes are discussed in some detail below.

Unpredictability.

The unpredictable nature of BD classrooms has several aspects to which teachers attend: the unpredictable nature of students themselves and the unpredictability course of aggression when it occurs. These two features, in turn, result in an increased focus on maintaining a safe environment that demands constant vigilance on the part of the teacher.

Unpredictability of students. Teachers working with BD students view their students as unpredictable, and despite attempts to predict and prevent aggression, they are not always successful. The following text selections illustrate student unpredictability.

> *Every restraint and every time out and kind of restraint is a different kind of thing . . . they're just different experiences. I mean, there's never two that are alike. Sort of, like every day you come in, there's, you never have the same day twice.* (Sarah)

> *You know, the antecedents are never the same. So it's very difficult to know what the trigger is . . . if he* (a student) *doesn't get what he needs, he's probably going to be upset. But it could be around, you know, trying to check out a library book, or not being able to find a marker that he wants, or not being able to write something the way he wants to write it. And so it could happen at any moment.* (Nicky)

> *I think that one thing that you find you do, is you tend to expect*

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the unexpected in this class, and therefore I think you're prepared whether you realize you are or not . . . and plus too, any time anything happens in the classroom, your main concern is the safety of the students. (Tina)

I was really trying to figure out, "where did that come from?" It was really a shock. There was nothing leading up to it, and the next thing I know, I look up, he already has tossed a desk, and so then I thought, "Oh well, if I don't know what he's going to do next, he's really unpredictable . . . (Jo)

Each kid is different. Each kid's a class size of one. (Dan)

Unpreditable aggression: Quick and out-of-control. Aggression is experienced as something that can almost take on a life of its own, something that is fast and can easily become out-of-control. Furthermore, aggression is perceived as something that can take unexpected directions, and that can spread to other students. The follow text selections are taken from among many that illustrate the nature of aggressive events from the teacher perspective.

. . . it went from something so minor to this huge fiasco in a matter of seconds. (Ginger in describing an incident in which police were called to her classroom to remove a student following an aggressive incident.)

At the time it was so fast, that it didn't even dawn, it didn't even

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register that I'd been hit. (Molly)

Usually when I have a student (who is aggressive), *it's almost like reading a novel.* (You can tell) *where you start out and, you can tell when it's the the climax, and then the resolution is taking place and the conflict and everything. And you know the conflict is . . . just like a rise, of course it happened much faster than when you're reading a novel or a story, but I had left the student, gone over to my file cabinet and turned around, it had already climaxed and escalated into a full scale vilent outburst.* (Tina)

To me, it's (as if) *your whole mind's working, trying to make a plan at how to de-escalate the kids and how to get the situation under control and it's such a fast thing, I mean everything, I mean it's like split-second. You have to think of it so quick.* (Sara)

They become anxious, they have a hard time focusing. And of course we try to, if it's really out of control, we get them out of the room, just because it's toxic. (Nicky)

Relationships with Students

A second global theme that characterized the experience of student aggression for participants was that of relationship with students. In descriptions of aggressive incidents, and in their interpretations of those incidents after the passage of time, teachers are aware of the relationships they have with their

students, and their accounts illuminate this awareness.

You couldn't always rely on the relationship to get him to do (what you want him to do), *I mean, it was there, but it wasn't always strong enough on his part to make him always want to do what you wanted him to do.* (Anne)

Our situation here is so intimate. I mean, we're with each other all the time. And a lot of times, these kids, they'll tell me anything. (Tina)

"*You probably know more about me than anybody,*"(Hannah describing her conversation with a student.) And later: *There's kids I get real close with.*

You need to respect kids so they know we do care about them. (Dan)

I guess I feel like I can make a difference. And that sounds kind or

corny, but you know, there's a part of me that loves that these kids need me so. (Tina)

The multi-faceted nature of student/teacher relationships not only is a salient feature in descriptions of student aggression, but an understanding of the context in which relationships occur shows it to serve useful purposes for teachers. For Anne, relationships sometimes (but not always) get students to do what she wants, for Tina, relationships reinforce that she is needed and important to her students.

How do Teacher Perceptions of Student Aggression Relate to Stress and Job Satisfaction?

The themes of unpredictability and relationship each serve to influence variables related to job satisfaction and stress in numerous ways. They are explored below.

Vigilance and Stress

Because teachers often experience student aggression as unpredictable, and because events can become out of control during aggression, certain teacher behaviors are thematic. For example, teachers report heightened vigilance of students so they can attempt to prevent aggression or at least to control it when it does start. The vigilance participants report is similar to characteristics common to stressful experiences, since one of the common reactions humans have in stressful situations is heightened awareness of the environment (Hobofil, 1989). For participants in this study, vigilance and attempts at control have as their ultimate goal the safety of their students when aggression occurs.

> *I've always tried to make sure that I was real aware and that made me even more aware of what's going on. It gave me another set of eyes and ears someplace, I can be over on that side of the screen working at the computer with one kid, and they're amazed. I can hear stuff in the back of the room. And I think it just helped me fine tune.* (Molly, describing an incident in which she was hit by a student.)

But you know, as far as the aggression--I think it's just, my main concern is the safety. The safety of the child and the safety of the others that are in the room. (Helen)

You'd have to get to him so he wouldn't hurt the other children. Or he would, you know, you know you'd have to get to him so he wouldn't abuse the other kids, because you know, I guess you're supposed to take the abuse more than, you know, you have to protect the other students. (Sara)

I think in all honesty, the fist thing I'm thinking about is, the first issue that comes up for me with aggressive kids is safety. Safety of the kids involved. My own safety. Then it's looking at, you know, property. Will this kid get into, what's he going to break that's expensive? (John)

The kids will tell you in a heartbeat I'm not blind. . . I said, "I can smell behavior." I said, "You might as well get ready." (Renee, a teacher with visual impairment, describing her vigilance in her classroom.)

Vigilant focus on students and concerns for safety, are sometimes accompanied by personal stressful reactions to an aggressive event. While some may develop strategies to mask this personal reaction, or even to reduce the degree of the stress response, participants report common symptoms of situational stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1985; Selye, 1956).

All I'm trying to say (to myself) *is, "Carolyn, keep it under control. Carolyn, this is not worth what could happen." I guess I'm just more concerned with myself. I could feel the tension in my body and my words generally got high and I started screaming. I would be louder than him, you know.* (Carolyn, describing her feelings during an incident of student aggression.)

It's really hard to control myself. I would find that it was real, once engaged that way it was real hard to maintain control. Not like I was going to hit him or anything, but just like verbally. (Jan)

And you know, of course, the whole time your heart's racing and your blood pressure's up and your pulse is up and you're trying to use this calm voice. (Nicky)

Well, I used to, I think, when the kid escalated, you could see yourself going the same way, and I've learned not to do that. (Anne)

The Role of Student/teacher Relationships

Student teacher relationships stand out as an important factor for reducing the stressful effects of student aggression. Relationships reduced the stressful effect of aggression in several ways: they improved prediction and the chances of prevention of stressful aggressive incidents, they provided social support to both teachers and students, and were also a source of pleasure and reward during the

work day.

Prediction and prevention. One aspect of student/teacher relationship involved knowledge of students gained over time and with familiarity—the patterns of their behavior, their home life, being able to "read" their emotions and attitudes. When school structures and demands take time and energy away from direct student contact for BD teachers, there are fewer opportunities for teachers to get to know students. It is this aspect of student relationship that helps predict when violent outbursts will occur and serve to provide suggestions for ways to work with students to prevent or control violence. Prediction becomes easier through knowing students well and the safety of other students can more likely to be protected. For example, if participants knew their students well, they could better understand how to interact with them in helpful ways.

> *I know the child. I get to know the kid. You've got to know the child. You've got to know whether you can say this to him, that to him, and this is going to set him off. And you do that by trial and error sometimes . . . be consistent, but be fair and loving at the same time.* (Renee)

> *So many of them are just hungering for love and affection and attention, and if you connect with them, be consistent with them, treat them like people, you know, you're going to score with some of them, not all of them.* (Dan)

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Student relationships and social support. The research indicating that social support acts as a stress buffer is fairly conclusive (Cohen & Willis, 1995; Gulielmi & Tatrow, 1998: Hendricks, 1992; Kruger, Bernstein, & Botman , 1994). Participants in this study describe features of social support they find in relationships with their students.

> *He* (one of her students) *knows I'm having a bad day, he will, he will try to protect me. If someone else is acting up, he will try and step in, which I've talked to him and said, "You can't. This is my job."* (Molly)

> *He* (one of her students) *says I'm his best friend. . . you know, the family realized that I'm just a part of his life.* (Hannah)

> *We can laugh at each other's silly mistakes, I mean those kinds of things. It's like a family, like that. They're still kids . . .* (Jo)

A second facet of social support experienced in relationships with aggressive students had to do with the pleasure and interest the participants took in the relationship with BD students.

> *They're good kids. They really are. They are so sweet. There are very few kids* (in which) *I can't find something I like.* (Jan)

I do love these kids. They are just like my own children. (Renee)

Actually, these kids (BD students) *are more interesting. . . because I like the 'loonier', I like the weird cases.* (Molly)

I think I originally got into special education and working with angry and aggressive kids because in some way I was attracted to the anger. (John)

Discussion: Making Sense of Student Aggression

In considering the interplay of important contextual features when experiencing student aggression, several important points can be made about stress and student aggression for the teachers in this study.

Making sense of aggression

Aggression is perceived as an event that is unpredictable, is easily out-of-control, and that often demands vigilance. It is not personal safety but the safety of students that stands out to teachers during aggressive incidents with students. Because participants in the study are concerned about the safety of students, they work hard to predict and control, both their students' aggression and their reaction to it. The unpredictable nature of aggressive outbursts heightens stress, because it makes prediction and control of the aggression more difficult. This, in turn, compromises classroom safety. Extensive research on occupational stress shows that work stress results when job demands limit the amount of control workers have over the success of their work (Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998). Due to the

unpredictable and fast nature of aggressive outbursts, teachers value those things that help them predict, prevent, and control aggression. They find stressful those things that make prediction, prevention, and control more difficult.

Numerous studies (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990; Hendricks, 1992; Lawrenson & McKinnon, 1981; Pullis, 1992) identify factors such as excessive paperwork, numerous meetings and other time constraints, lack of support, and poor resources as significant sources of stress. When viewed in light of the central value BD teachers place on relationships with students, these research-supported sources of stress may be perceived as stressful in part because they interfere with relationships with students and because they make classroom life more unpredictable in ways that compromise safety. The factors that commonly correlate with special education teacher stress limit the time and attention teachers can give to students, and they prevent teachers from developing the kind of knowledge of students and mutual respect that can facilitate expert interventions.

Finally, although aggressive acts are not pleasant and are at times stressful to teachers, having personal relationships with students helps to mitigate some of the stressful aspects of working in unpredictable classrooms with challenging students. Social support and personal pleasure are important aspects of relationships for the participants in this study. When work is characterized by voluminous paperwork, numerous meetings, and large class size, the length and quality of time aggressive students and their teachers spend together is reduced. As a result, the pleasurable aspects of relationships in the classroom are diminished and the power relationships have to buffer stress and increase work pleasure is also weakened.

What Implications Arise From an Understanding of Teacher Experiences of Aggression?

Although it has been said many times over, it is crucial we limit in as many ways as possible the events that interfere with teacher-student relationships in BD classrooms. We must look at the number of meetings, the lack of parental and administrative support, case overloads, and excessive paperwork when we attempt to increase the length of stay of BD teachers. We must take a critical look at these factors not only because teachers report them to be stressful, but because they interfere with actual job success when working with aggressive students. Multiple teacher role demands and excessive non-student-contact duties do not allow teachers to develop relationships with students. Student-teacher relationships help teachers predict and control possible aggression and also provide sources of job satisfaction to the teacher. To the extent that any school policy or job requirement limits the time and quality of relationships between aggressive students and their teachers, that policy or requirement is likely to damage job satisfaction and success.

Perhaps we should also rethink the role of student/teacher attachments. While warning against emotional attachment is common in the training of BD teachers, emotional aspects of relationships may serve as a source of job satisfaction. Rather than attempt to avoid emotional aspects of relationships, perspective BD teachers should be encouraged to recognize and work within emotional boundaries that make sense given the context in which they occur. Training programs for BD teachers should consider treating student/teacher

relationships as important tools for successful interventions.

Of primary importance is that we rethink how we do research in special education. For example, quite often in the literature on special education teacher retention, variables that lend themselves to systematic objective measurement are more frequently explored than are variables less easy to define, as is the case with the exploration of relationships in the classroom. Recent research trends suggest ways to explore relationship variables in work settings (Blustein, 2001). It may well be that encouraging qualitative methodologies in special education research, as Blustein suggests, will provide further information on variables that do not lend themselves to objective measurement.

Further research on relationship issues in BD classrooms, whether qualitative or quantitative, is important. We need to understand more clearly how relationships can work as tools to promote effective interventions and can also contribute to teacher job satisfaction. Strong research findings explicating the role relationships play with aggressive students can support educational policy that would result in smaller class size, reductions in paperwork, and other factors that interfere with student/teacher relationships.

It is no mystery that student aggression is <u>not</u> recognized as a primary source of stress for BD teachers. Skilled BD teachers have some controls over aggression through strategies that monitor, prevent, and control aggression. They use relationships with students to aid their work with aggressive students. Importantly, relationship with students provide social support and job pleasure, both of which act to buffer job stress. What is a mystery is that with what is known about sources of stress for BD teachers, we repeatedly ignore those factors that

are crucial to their career satisfaction–especially in this time of increased demand for skilled BD teachers. We continue to give lip service to reduction of paperwork, smaller caseloads, and so forth, but at the same time see a proliferation of legislation and practices that serves to increase the time spent on them by special education teachers. Job demands that interfere with teacher/student relationships are a primary source of stress for BD teachers and unchecked, are likely to be an inducement to leave the field.

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Table 1. Participant demographic data

Name	Years of experience	Type of experience	Formal training	Current position
Sara	8	Psychiatric hospital setting; Autistic self-contained, secondary; BD self-contained elementary	BS: Psychology and Elementary Education; MS: Special Education	BD self-contained, elementary (6 students)
Nicky	8	BD self-contained, elementary; LD/BD resource, elementary; Special education, preschool	BA: Early Childhood; MS Ed: Special Education	BD Self-contained, elementary (5 students)
Carolyn	13	BD resource, middle school; BD resource, elementary	BA: Early Childhood; Additional course work: BD certification	BD resource, elementary (12 students)
Helen	13	BD resource, K-12; BD hospital day treatment program, elementary; BD self-contained elementary	BA: Physical Education/Health; MS.Ed.: Special Education; Additional course work: Crisis Intervention certification	BD self-contained, middle school (5 students)
Renee	25	Inner city, elementary; Psychiatric institutional setting, adults; Jail school, secondary; BD self-contained, middle school	B:, Elementary Education; MS: Severe/Profound Mental Retardation; Additional course work: BD certification	BD self-contained, middle school (8 students)
Tina	6	MR/LD resource, middle school; BD self-contained middle school	BS: Special Education	BD self-contained, middle school (12 students)
Molly	20	BD residential, elementary to secondary school; BD self-contained, elementary; BD/LD resource, middle school	BS Elementay Education/Psychology; MS, Special Education	BD Resource, middle school (31 students)
Jan	22	BD resource, elementary and middle school; LD/MR/BD resource, elementary and middle school	BS: Secondary Education; MS: Special Education	Resource, middle school (22 students)

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Table 1. Participant demographic data, cont.

Name	Years of experience	Type of experience	Formal training	Current position
Dan	10	Alternative secondary school; Outdoor program for youth at risk, secondary; LD/BD resource, secondary; Self-contained alternative/intensive high school	BS: Secondary Education; MS: Special Education	Self-contained alternative/intensive secondary (12 students)
Jo	9	Self-contained, hearing impaired, secondary; BD self-contained, secondary	BS: Special Education; Additional course work, BD certification	BD Self-contained, secondary (18 students)
Ginger	6	BD aide, resource, secondary; BD resource, secondary; BD self-contained, secondary; Youth-at-risk summer school, secondary;	MS: Special Education	BD Self-contained, secondary (5 students)
John	12	Regular education, secondary; BD adolescent hospital day treatment program; University instructor	BS: Secondary Education; MS: Special Education	BD self-contained, secondary (8 students)
Hannah	10	BD resource aide, elementary and secondary; Alternative program, secondary; BD resource, secondary	BS: Secondary Education; Additional course work: BD certification	BD resource, secondary (15 students)
Anne	17	BD/LD resource, secondary	BS: Special Education; MS: Special Education	BD/LD resource, secondary (14 students)

Note(s):

(1) In regard to formal training, since different schools award different types of degrees (Bachelor of Science vs. Bachelor of Arts, for example), degrees are listed as reported by participants. The following abbreviations apply: BS=Bachelor of Science; BA=Bachelor of Arts

(2) The following abbreviations for programs are used: BD, Behavioral Disorders; LD, Learning Disabilities; MR, Mental Retardation

(3) The term 'resource' refers to resource classrooms.

(4) The term 'self-contained' refers to self-contained classrooms.

(5) The following terms refer to age level in schools: secondary, (9th through 12th grades); middle school (6th through 8th grades); and elementary (kindergarten through 5th grades).

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